

Our Tribes

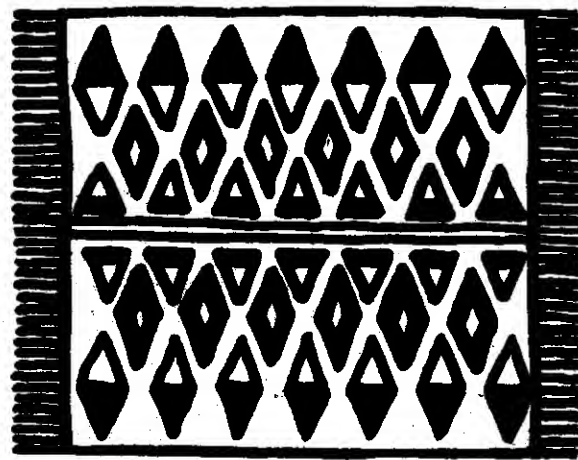
A Precious Heritage



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Introduction

It may surprise you to know that out of every 1,000 Indians, 69 belong to the tribal community. In fact India has the largest tribal population in the world, and yet we know so little about them. Who are the Indian tribals? They are people who live in a distinct area, speak a common dialect and belong to a common social group. Most tribals live in very dense forests or mountainous regions hard to reach by road. In the past they lived simple lives devoted to hunting, grazing, and cultivating their land by the method of axe cultivation in which part of a forest is cut down, the branches burnt, and the seeds sown with the first rains.

But as more and more forests are being cut down, the tribals have been forced to give up their old methods of cultivation, and to learn to use the plough the way Indian farmers have been doing for centuries. But many tribals have resisted the use of the unfamiliar plough.

Take the case of the Baigas from Bihar, who believe they have originated from the womb of the Mother Earth. Hence they refuse to wound her breast by using the plough. Despite immense pressures from the government, the Baigas refuse to give up hunting and have still not taken to ploughing. Because of this they are now reduced to a state of poverty. They have lost the use of the forests which were once their home, and the people who considered themselves to be the true Pashupati, or lords of the animals, now suffer oppression and exploitation at the hands of baniyas and liquor vendors.

The Juangs of Orissa could not take to the unfamiliar plough and have met with a similar fate. They have been reduced to

landless labourers in economic bondage to their richer neighbours.

Large scale construction of roads, the transistor radio and the television network have been other important factors in bringing the tribals closer to the mainstream of Indian life. But what is surprising is that increasing contact with modern civilisation has had a paralyzing effect on their lives. It seems strange that tribes, whose taste in their own sphere of art, handicrafts and textiles is so fine and true, lose all sense of proportion when they are face to face with what they wrongly consider a "superior" culture. Open a school in a tribal village—and the children will stop learning to weave, carve or paint. Start a handicrafts workshop—and they remove their lovely ancient ornaments. Open a shop—and they throng to buy shoddy plastic goods.

More and more tribal children are growing up without learning their local dialects. Instead they are learning one of the Devnagiri scripts because that will help improve their job prospects later in life. While there is no denying the importance of learning other Indian languages, it seems a shame that tribal children should grow up without learning their "mother tongue" as well. Tribal languages are beautiful and rich in imagery and should not be allowed to die.

Verrier Elwin, a leading authority on tribals, said that the tribals did not need to write poetry since they talked poetry. Describing the language spoken by the Gonds of Bihar, one of the largest tribes in India, Elwin said that a Gond woman would say that chillies are red and green birds sitting on a bush. A man speaking of his pregnant wife would say that she must be treated as a flower, or the light

may fade from her blossom. An old woman would say that even the poorest cot has legs of gold and a frame of jewels if a beautiful girl sleeps on it.

Such beautiful speech is spoken by all our tribals. Tribal children sitting around the fire at night love to ask each other riddles. What looks like a peacock but has only one leg? An umbrella. Which little sparrow scatters its feathers about the house? A lamp. Which flower blossoms out of a dry tree? Fire. It would be a shame if such colourful speech died out.

Tribal art is also being sacrificed at the altar of modern civilization. Tribal art is one of the most pure forms of art because it is deeply inspired by religious ideas. The little brass images of horses, elephants, musicians on a swing, so popular in our state emporiums, are made by the Murias of Bastar as offerings to their gods. Similarly the Nagas have woven some of the most splendid varieties of cloth, carved wooden and brass heads, bamboo drinking mugs and tobacco pipes, all meant to be worn or used by the successful warrior. Tribal art is in danger of dying. Originally it was inspired by their religion and rituals, and social customs like head-hunting and marriage ceremonies. The little brass images of animals and musicians are made by the Murias of Bastar as offerings to their gods. Similarly, the Nagas weave some of their most splendid textiles as garments for successful warriors.

With the breakdown of their lifestyle, the tribals are giving up the art forms which are natural to them, and are making crude and clumsy imitations of bazaar art which they feel will help them bring in quick money.

This is the central tragedy of their lives. Their old lifestyle has been destroyed by

scheming money-lenders, and land-hungry farmers from the plains who think nothing of grabbing tribal land because they know they are simple people who can be easily tricked. The result is that the tribals have been swindled bit by bit and have sunk deep into poverty. The Saoras used to have a special sacrifice to purify their villages each time they had a visitor. A goat or fowl would be sacrificed when the tribe was visited by a petty official, and a black pig when an anthropologist visited! But now the stream of visitors has increased so rapidly that their only question is "When will this stream end? When will we be left alone?"

How best can our tribals be integrated into the mainstream of Indian life? There is no easy answer to this question. In U.S.A. the federal government has spent millions of dollars in trying to improve the lot of Red Indians. Many leading American doctors, psychologists, teachers, writers, actors and actresses, have fought on behalf of the Red Indians, insisting they be provided with good schools, medical care, job opportunities and so on. And yet the Red Indians remain an unhappy lot. The same can be said about the Australian aborigines. Although vast tracts of land have been reserved for them, and they are being given economic assistance, more and more Australian aborigines are taking to alcohol.

It many ways the tribal problem defies solution, because each tribe's pattern of living is inspired by certain customs which are central to that tribe. For example among the Nagas it is head-hunting that is the central ritual of that tribe, and many of their social customs and arts and crafts are woven around it. When head-hunting was banned, it was naturally a great blow

to the Nagas.

Many of our tribals have become Christians and are provided education in missionary schools and have risen to high positions. They have become doctors, teachers, nurses, farmers and engineers. But what is unfortunate is that they lose contact with their own people and, in fact, often look down upon them. As a result they exist in a kind of isolation which is not healthy for them.

The government can help the cause of the tribals by providing them with economic aid, better schools and colleges so that they can pursue technical education



as well. Every tribal family must also be provided with cultivable land, and the government should ensure that greedy farmers from the plains and grabbing moneylenders cannot snatch their land away.

The old days, when tribals wore no clothes and ate strange foods, has now vanished into legend. Verrier Elwin was one of the last outsiders who witnessed their old customs. He records how he was invited to parties where he was served roasted rats and mice in the Bondo hills, chutney of red ants among the Murias, large white palm tree grubs fried in their own fat, which he found a little too rich, and a "wonderful pilaff of dog's meat" from the Kabui Nagas. How many of us are prepared to share in such delicacies? Not too many I daresay. But to establish a bond with them, we must partake in their lives just as they must gradually adjust to ours. Special responsibility rests on the government who should not make the tribals ashamed of their past or force them to make a sudden break with it, but should help them to build upon it and allow them to grow.

As more and more tribals leave their homes to eke out a meagre living as labourers, miners, factory workers, and domestic servants, let us return to their villages and discover for ourselves the remnants of their life of beauty, dance and song, which they have so tearfully left behind.

The Nagas

The Nagas are a warrior tribe living in the north-eastern hills of India. They were formerly notorious for head-hunting, which is the only thing most people seem to know about them, but this practise was stopped some time back and the last recorded case of head-hunting was in 1958. They are a proud, independent people, gifted with an ability to create splendid dances and songs, and with a taste for colourful clothes and jewellery. Mongoloid in features, they are always well groomed, with their black hair well combed and a fresh flower stuck in their earlobe or hair knot. It would be hard to beat a Naga in his ceremonial finery and he makes full use of his natural skill and taste in the use of cowries, feathers, goat's hair dyed red, shells, bone and ivory.

Christoph Haimendorf, a well known anthropologist, spent many years studying the Nagas. He wrote: "One might well imagine that in the hard world of head-hunters there was little room for gentleness and sensitivity to the feelings of others. Yet I found many Nagas, including men who proudly wore a head-hunter's tatoo, people of extraordinary gentleness. In their dealings with their family and co-villagers, they were very considerate of the feelings of others."

The word "Naga" is commonly assumed to have been derived from the Sanskrit word *nag*, which means snake. But Verrier Elwin insists that "Naga" has nothing to do with snakes, and is derived from the word *nok* which means people. However, the Nagas never use this word, referring to themselves variously as Konyaks, Aos, Angamis, Lothas or Semas, depending on which tribe they belong to. The name



Naga was given to them by the people of the plains and it is so widely used that even their state is called Nagaland.

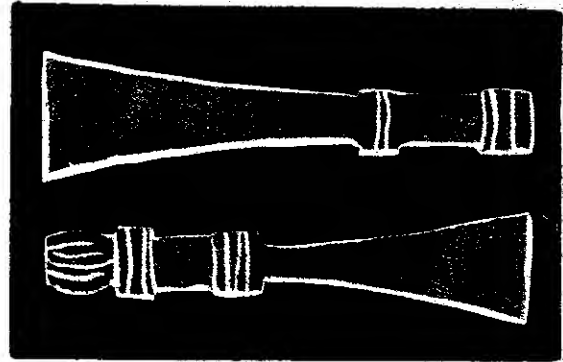
On feast days it is the boys and men who outshine the women in the variety and splendour of their clothes. Men wear conical hats made of red cane, decorated with red goat's hair and a few tail feathers of the great Indian hornbill. Warriors wear woven baldrics and ceremonial hip baskets decorated with bird skins, boar's tusks, carved wooden heads and also monkey skulls. Naga men love wearing earrings, arm rings and neck ornaments as well.

For ceremonial occasions women wear colourful skirts decorated with embroidery, glass beads and tassels of dyed goats hair. The skirts are of a great variety and are woven by the women on small looms. The women are very fond of ornaments, arm bands and hair ornaments made of glass beads.

No Naga ever leaves his village unless he is armed. Their most important weapon is the *dao*, which has a broad iron blade about 8" long, which is fixed into a bamboo or wooden handle. It is used in felling trees, splitting bamboo, slaughtering cattle and fowl and even in hair cutting. It is also used as a weapon for war. Other weapons are spears and guns—the Konyak forges have turned out simple muzzle loaders for generations.

Weapons used on festive occasions are also decorated with colourful trimmings. *Dao* handles are decorated with tufts of hair, usually in bands of red and black. Ceremonial spears are also decorated with red and black goat's hair.

The Nagas build their villages on the most commanding points along the ridges of the hills. This allows them to observe every movement on the path leading up

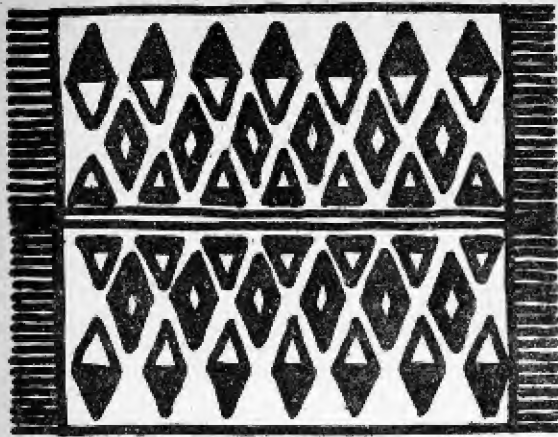


*Most precious to the Nagas, the dao has many uses.
It is even used for cutting hair.*

to the village. The villages were formerly barricaded by stone walls and fences of thorns, and some had village gates—great wooden doors decorated with painted carvings in bas-relief, which were approached by narrow winding paths sunk in the ground.

The number of houses in a village vary from 50 to 250. The average house is spacious and far more comfortable than the houses built by peasants all over India. Each house has a long hall about 30 ft. long and 6 ft. wide. In this is kept a rice pounding table. Next to the hall is a living room where meals are cooked and eaten. Behind this room is a spacious utility room which is used for the drying of rice and cutting up of animals to be used for food. Behind this room is a large verandah, erected on bamboo piles, where the men sit and make baskets and mats while the women busy themselves with spinning, weaving and sewing.

Prominent in many villages is the *morung* or dormitory for the young, unmarried men. Some tribes also have small houses for unmarried girls. The *morungs* are guard houses, recreation clubs, centres of education, art, and discipline. They also have an important ceremonial purpose. Many house the great wooden drums which are



A geometric design typical of Naga textiles.

beaten to summon for war or to announce a festival. Formerly skulls and other trophies of war were hung in the *morungs*, the walls of which were decorated with figures of tigers, hornbills, human figures, monkeys, lizards and life-size figures of men and women. The condition of a *morung* indicates the state of a village. A well-maintained *morung* means a healthy and prosperous village and a broken down *morung* means a decaying village.

The boys are sent to the *morung* when they are six years old. They are taught to serve the older boys and those who disobey are severely punished. The boys are taught to sing community songs, dance, and work together. They develop a deep sense of loyalty for their *morung*.

A Naga's first loyalty is to his *morung* rather than to his village. The members of a *morung* form a tightly knit community that is more closely integrated than the larger village community. In the past it was a matter of honour for members of a *morung* to avenge the death of any of their members by taking a head from the *morung* or village responsible. Blood feuds thus continued for years.

The *morung* also serves as a sanctuary. No man seeking shelter there can be touch-

ed, regardless of the charge against him. He will be protected until the clan elders review his case and settle it for him.

The staple food of the Nagas is rice supplemented by beef and pork. Their favourite drink is rice beer, which may be described as a nourishing soup with a kick in it. For while its alcoholic content is small, it contains most of the essential nutrients and is an important source of strength and energy. The Nagas have recently started drinking tea and even taking a little milk. The Nagas, like most hill tribes of Southeast Asia, knew neither about the milking of cattle nor did they use animals for ploughing the land.

Verrier Elwin gives an interesting account of how one of the Naga tribes had devised their own style of drinking tea. They had heard that tea was made with a kettle. So they would pour water from a bamboo container into a kettle, then they put the leaves into another bamboo and poured the water from the kettle back into the bamboo to heat it! The tea would be drunk without milk or sugar.

In the past the Nagas made almost everything for themselves and some tribes showed great skill in making household objects. Drinking vessels made of bamboo and mithun bones, wooden spoons, wooden plates, tobacco pipes and baskets of different shapes were made by them. In fact the Nagas like to beautify every article they use in their daily life. They are expert in wood carving and their public buildings are full of graceful wood-work.

The basic interest of every Naga is in his family, the clan, and the village. This is what he regards as his culture which must not be interfered with. He is passionately attached to his land, and the Nagas have covered their hillsides with a success-

ion of terraces on which they grow rice, which is their most important crop.

As the young shoots of rice plants cover the hill slopes, the villagers know no rest. Each field has to be weeded several times. As young boys and girls often work together on the rice fields, many a romance begins during weeding. The girls invite the boys to work in their parents' fields. Towards the end of the weeding the boys entertain the girls to rice beer, and a few days later the girls invite the boys.

Some of the romances develop into marriage but even after marriage there is complete equality between men and women. Unlike the usual Indian bride who lives a very sheltered life, Naga women are free to meet who they want to. A couple starts a household only after the birth of their first child and it is from this point that husband and wife are expected to be faithful to each other. Nevertheless, Nagas

make good husbands and wives and harsh or cruel treatment by either spouse is seldom heard of.

Naga religion is of a type common throughout tribal India. They see nature alive with unseen forces and believe the world to be populated with hundreds of spirits and ghosts. Priests and medicine men placate these spirits, banish those who give disease, and attract those which bless marriages, agriculture, the craftsman and his work.

Verrier Elwin describes in his autobiography an amusing conversation he had on theology with a tribal chieftan.

"Tell me who is the Supreme Being?" Elwin asked.

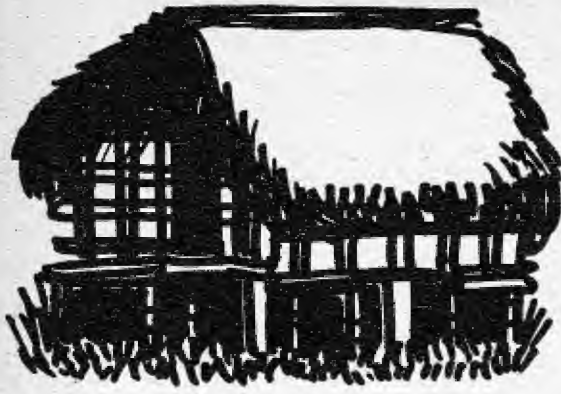
The chieftan raised his hand to heaven, "It isn't me, I swear it."

"But who created the world?" Elwin asked.

"I have no idea. I didn't do it."

A favourite pastime with women — weaving baskets.





A spacious Naga home on stilts.

"And what about the sun and moon?"

"Not me, not me! I did wipe out a village in my youth, but I have done nothing since."

A great many Nagas have become Christians, and with this the *morung* as an institution is dying out. This was a big blow to the Naga community life which lost one of its powerful foundations.

Valour and martial skill confer social prestige, but yet another way is by a display of lavish hospitality. Status is linked with wealth, but it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth. One must spend lavishly too.

Thus a central feature of Naga life was the giving of Feasts of Merits. The mithun, which is the chief domestic animal of a Naga, was sacrificed and entire villages were invited to share the festivities. The Feasts brought the donor honour both now and after death and he could henceforth wear special clothes and ornaments and decorate his house in a special way. Only a married man could give a feast, for his wife would have an honoured place in the proceedings.

The striving for social prestige on the part of the individual helps the entire village. The need to accumulate large

resources before a feast can help act as an incentive to economic enterprise, and at the same time check personal consumption. Thus the surplus wealth of a prominent man is channeled to his fellow villagers.

The practise of head-hunting has attracted world wide attention. The Nagas say that originally they did not know how to make war but one day a bird dropped a berry from a tree, and a lizard and a red ant fought for it. Someone saw the ant cut off the lizard's head and thus men learnt to take heads. The Nagas used to believe that great energy resides in the human head. By bringing a head to their village they were injecting vital energy into their village. Head-hunting ceased soon after the British began to exercise control over the Naga Hills.

Like all tribals the Nagas are also changing rapidly. Improved communications have led to the import of many novelties—western styled clothes, chairs, tables, walking shoes, electric torches, brass and aluminium pots for cooking, plastic ornaments, the latest cosmetics and so on.

But the real changes go deeper. With the banning of head-hunting and the dwindling Feasts of Merits, the pace of life has changed. It is no longer possible to wear the finest products of Naga textile art, for those depended on the success of war or the generosity in feasting. Wood carving has suffered. The *morungs* are being neglected.

But the past few years have witnessed a revival of Naga culture. Their innate sense of beauty, their good taste, and their self-reliance will help maintain their traditions of weaving and other arts. And the old life on the hillside, in the forest or by the mountain side will continue even as they grope for a new direction.

The Murias

The Murias are one of the most colourful and interesting tribes of India. They live around Bastar which is in Madhya Pradesh. Their countryside is surrounded by the evergreen sal forests and towards the north there are rows of sharply rising hills called the Abijamar mountains. Towards the south the country is bisected by the Indravati river. This rambling countryside with its picturesque hills, great rocks and vast forests helped shape some fascinating tribes.

The word "Muria" means tribesmen. The great bison-horn Maria, who live south of the Indravati river, also call themselves Murias, though there are differences between the Muria and Maria tribes.

Some anthropologists feel that the name *mur*, from which Muria has been derived, refers to the Flame of the Forest tree. But Verrier Elwin, who has had the distinction of living with the tribals for a long time, does not accept this theory. This tree is neither honoured by the tribals, nor does it grow abundantly in this area. He feels that *mur* means "permanent" and this refers to the permanent settlements and dwellings of the Murias.

The Murias are essentially cultivators and they have a saying that "it is as bad for a Muria to fail in his cultivation as for a monkey to slip from a branch". They have permanent fields but in some areas they continue to practise axe cultivation as do a few tribes of Central India.

The Murias call the axe "our milk giving cow" and with it they cut the trees and branches, set fire to them and sow their seeds in the ashes after the first rains. They

sow a number of seeds—millet, rice and pulses. Ceremonies are held at the time of preparing the fields, sowing the seeds and reaping the crops. They also maintain gardens around their huts and they pay a great deal of attention to them. There are special feasts called the New Eating ceremonies when the first crops are eaten.

The Murias supplement the profits of agriculture by collecting honey, extracting oil, hunting, fishing and gathering the different forest produce. The juice of sago palm and rice beer is very popular, and to the Murias the drinking of liquor is both a duty and a pleasure. It is a duty because they offer it to the gods at every festival.

The Murias have a little story about how the sago palm tree developed an important place in their life. A group of boys and girls came down to earth from the house of Bhagwan to bathe and dance. While bathing, they removed their cowrie ornaments which they could not find later. In their anger, they cursed the cowries,



"Now turn into sago palms and we will then be able to live amidst you and never lose you again." And that is how their countryside was blessed with thousands of sago palm trees!

The Muria villages are set among trees and each house is separated from the other by a fence that also surrounds the garden. The houses are built of timber or bamboo and plastered with mud and have thatched roofs. The Murias love animals and keep cattle, pigs, hens and goats. Their love for animals, especially pigs, goes to such an extreme that one day a man came to Verrier Elwin, complaining that his wife had run away with another man. "That I could have borne, but they took away my favourite pig!"

Elwin lived with the Murias and the bison-horn Marias for eight years. During his stay with them he received a box of superb mechanical toys from Bombay. "These toys," he recalls in his autobiography, "gave more pleasure over a wider area than any collection of toys ever made. They lasted eight years and were of great help in making contact with the Marias."

Their houses are cosy and homely, crammed with baskets, leaf-bundles and utensils. Fist traps, drums, and wooden clogs hang from the roof, and flutes and bows and arrows are stuck under the thatch. Inside, in an inner room, is kept the Pot of the Departed in which the family's ancestors are supposed to reside.

These houses are the homes only of the married. Once the children are seven or eight years old they are sent to live in the *ghotul*, a sort of boarding house where girls and boys grow up together. During the day time the children return to their homes to do the housework. The girls cook, bring water, clean the buildings with cow-dung,

husk the grain, and make mats. The boys, on the other hand, work in the fields and forests. They make and use the plough; they tend to the cattle; make and drive their carts; they go to hunt and fish; they watch the crops and harvest and winnow them.

The girls of the *ghotul* are called *motiaris* and the boys are called *cheliks*. Once they are admitted to the *ghotul* they are given membership names, and most Murias cherish their *ghotul* names. The head boy of the *ghotul* is called the Sirdar or Diwan, while the head girl is called Belosa. These leaders are chosen after a great deal of consideration, for it is they who organise the life and work schedule of the *ghotul*.

The *ghotul* is not as unusual or extraordinary as it sounds. The Nagas have similar dormitories which they call *morungs*. Most of the primitive tribes of South-east Asia, New Zealand, Africa and Australia have had such dormitories or "communal barracks," and these fulfil important social and religious functions.

Complete democracy prevails in these *ghotuls*. All the boys and girls are expected to do the same amount of work. They are taught discipline, cleanliness and hard work. Although the little boys and girls run errands for their leaders, the leaders are not supposed to abuse their privileges, otherwise they will be removed from office. The *ghotul* comes to life after supper when around a fire, girls and boys dance, sing and tell stories.

Girls resign from membership of a *ghotul* after their marriage. Boys are allowed to retain their membership till a few months after their marriage, when they are generally given a farewell feast. Despite the prominence of the *ghotul*, marriages are mostly arranged by the parents. Marriages can

take place only within the clan. Hence most of the marriages are the cross-cousin type. Out of the 2,000 marriages Verrier Elwin examined, 1,884 boys married according to their parents' wishes. This could only happen in a society which had a strong respect for its own organization and laws. Elwin also discovered that they have a strong sense of domestic morality, for most families were happy and united.

Muria boys and girls are fond of dressing up. Boys make combs for their friends and tobacco boxes for themselves. Girls make pendants, belts of beads and cowries, and necklaces to wear. Boys carve the pillars and doors of their *ghotul* buildings which



Such metal objects are made as offerings to gods.

are often the finest buildings in the village. They also make toys and masks. But above all the Murias and their neighbours, the bison-horn Marias, love to dance.

They have a superb marriage dance when the men, wearing great headdresses of bison-horns and carrying long drums, move in a great circle. The "bison" charge and fight with each other, pick up leaves on the point of their horns, and chase the girl dancers. The girls, wearing their best beads and brass necklaces, each with a dancing stick in their right hand, form a long line and go round and through the

men dancers with many different movements and steps.

Many Murias wear colourful masks while dancing. These masks are made of wood or gourd. The leader of the dance, called the Nakta, wears a mask made of gourd. Two brass rings are put for the eyes, the nose is made of bees' wax, a slit is made for the mouth, and grains of rice are inserted to represent the teeth. The hair of a goat or bear is attached as a beard and a peacock's tuft is fixed on the head. The bison-horn Maria masks are decorated with red and white patterns and are covered with bear's hair.

The Marias have a great attachment to their head dress and it is the chief treasure of a Maria home. It is dismantled and kept with the utmost care in closed bamboo baskets. It takes nearly one hour to assemble. The headdress and the dance is the sole expression of the Marias' aesthetic sensibility. They do not carve, or paint, or model images on their walls. Everything they have to say goes into their dance.

Elwin describes the sad story of how a young Maria man called Alami Mata returned home from the forest to find the splendid horns and feathers of his dance outfit stolen. The loss was too much to bear and he hanged himself.

The Murias believe in a large number of gods, whom they picture in a simple and homely manner. Their Supreme Being is called Bhagwan. Then there are gods of the earth, streams, trees, sky, rain, home and a host of local dieties. Most of the gods are honoured in little temples of mud and thatch which are built on the outskirts of the village. They have a large number of priests and a number of mediums who communicate to the gods while in a state of trance.

Unfortunately, there are people who disapprove of the manners and customs of tribals such as the Murias. To them the Murias seem very strange. Such people have gone into areas where the Murias live and have preached that there should be no dancing and singing, no alcohol should be drunk, no meat eaten, people must be fully clothed and children must be married young. If these rules were not followed, offenders would pay fines.

A few years ago some villages were "converted" to their ideas, and unspeakable drabness settled on them. In the long evenings, the men and women had nothing to do. There was no singing or dancing.

While it is important that the Murias become part of modern life, it should be seen that they lose none of their own culture. One way this could be done is to see that teachers, social workers, and others who work among them, take a special course in anthropology and tribal culture. Any teaching should be done through activities which are familiar to the tribals, and through their stories and songs.

The Murias, like the other tribals, are continuously being exploited. Care must be taken to see that government officers and members of the police who come in contact with the tribals do not demand free food and drink from them.

If a Muria is sentenced to long term imprisonment, he will beg to be hanged. Few of the wilder bison-horn Marias survive long imprisonment. The grim, forbidding walls, the unfamiliar food and language, the denial of human companionship, crush and oppress them. This is also true of tribesmen from NEFA and Nagaland

who are imprisoned in the plains. A sense of isolation and despair comes over these prisoners. No one knows their language and they find the heat of the plains unbearable.



The Santhals

The Santhals are one of the largest tribes in India, and live in W. Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. They are a festive tribe and their year is woven around a series of joyful and colourful festivals. They are also excellent hunters and farmers. They hunt with bows and arrows, spears, battle axes and shields. Their arrows are of two kinds. One, which has a sharp, pointed iron head, is used for killing big game, while the bolt-arrow is used in stunning birds and smaller animals. But with more and more forests being cut down, the Santhals have turned to fishing. They fish in rivers, ponds and other waterlogged areas with the help of nets, traps and bow and arrow.

They also have communal fishing and hunting expeditions where men from a number of villages participate. These hunts last from one to four days and require the presence of the hunting priest, who performs a ceremony before the hunt starts. These hunting expeditions take place in February and March. The game is shared amongst all the participants with a larger share to the man who kills the animal. Except for the meat of dog, cat and horse, they eat the meat of almost every other animal including a large variety of birds.

This may seem cruel to many of us, but we should not forget that most Santhals are very poor. Their staple food is boiled rice, which they eat twice a day. In the morning they take boiled rice soaked in water overnight with a pinch of salt and chilli, and at night they eat hot boiled rice with a thin, vegetable curry, since that is all they can afford.

Their history consists of one long, hard struggle, and it is to their credit that, unlike the Todas, they remain determined to win.

Their simple-heartedness has led them to be exploited by landlords and moneylenders. When the exploitation surpassed all limits they revolted against the British rulers and zamindars in 1871. Their mutiny was crushed ruthlessly by the British. But today they continue to be oppressed by moneylenders and landlords.

The Santhals are handsome, with a rich complexion. They speak Santhali which is one of the oldest dialects of India. Their beautiful women wear saris, which are worn knee length and wrapped around the upper part of the body. The women love jewellery and most of it is made of brass or silver. They wear heavy anklets, armlets, earrings, waist girdles and a tiara shaped ornament for the hair. They are very particular about grooming, and Santhal women will always be seen well dressed, with their hair oiled, combed and with some flowers pinned to their hair. Santhal men are scantily dressed, some with only a loin cloth, others with a short cloth taken between the legs and tied with a thick string round the waist. Today many are wearing *dhotis* and shirts.

A Santhal village consists of 30 to 40 huts clustered together on either side of a winding road. At the centre of a village is the *manjhithan*, a place where the Santhals offer prayers. It is a raised, square-shaped, mud platform with wooden posts at the corners supporting a thatched shed. The *manjhithan* is also used as a place where the village elders gather to decide issues of importance or to pass judgement on anyone who has broken tribal law.

Every village has a headman and *panchayat* called the *monren hor*. In case a person does not agree with the judgement the *panchayat* has passed, he is free to appeal to another court, called the supreme



court. The court entertains only grave offences. Notice that the court is in session is shown by a rope knotted to a branch of a *sal* tree, which is sent from market to market. If a person is found guilty, the entire village is informed of the sentence. A bamboo pole is fixed in front of the offender's house. A used leaf plate is attached to the pole as a sign of his being disgraced. Large crowds gather outside his house dancing with war-drums and brandishing broomsticks and half-burnt logs.

The guilty person or party must do public penance before he can be re-admitted to the community. The penance ceremony takes place at the village cross-roads, where crowds assemble to watch the

entire proceedings. He carries water in a pitcher with five holes, his clothes are carried around the market place, and he must pay a fine which is divided between the *panchayat*. Those assembled rinse their mouth with water from the pitcher as a mark of cleansing, after which the pitcher and clothes are thrown into the river. The offender must wash the feet of the village elders, and personally serve them food. Only then will he be given re-admission into the village.

The Santhals have some very interesting gods. They call the supreme being Thakur and he is the giver of life, rain, crops and animals. But they also have a number of *bongas* or supernatural beings who can be kind, powerful, haughty and evil depending on their nature. The Abge *bonga* is such a secretive god that no Santhal will disclose the Abge's secret name to even his wife, lest his spirit possess her and turn her into a witch. His secret name is whispered only to the eldest son. The five chief *bongas* live in the sacred grove near every Santhal village. This grove consists of four *sal* and one *mahua* tree.

The Santhals believe in *rakshas* and *bhuts*. Some Santhal women practise witchcraft and the Santhals believe these women to be so cunning and powerful, that they can influence the *bongas* by their charms. To counteract their evil influence they have *jan gurus* and *ojha gurus* who can remove the evil spells of the *bongas* and witches.

The most important ceremony for young boys is the *cacho chatiar* ceremony and if any man dies before performing it he is certain to become a *bhut*. The *cacho chatiar* ceremony marks a young boy's entrance into community life. No man is entitled to get married or have a funeral unless he has performed this ceremony.

Women rub oil and *haldi* on the bodies of all the village men. Rice beer is drunk and everyone sings and dances and makes merry. The young boy is allowed his first sip of beer. After he has drunk it, he is declared free from all impurities. The boy declares to the *panchayat*, "We were black like crows, now we are white as white paddy birds. You five men are our witnesses." An old man will then narrate to the gathering the traditional story of the creation of the world and their wanderings till they reached their present land.

As *cacho chatiar* is essential for boys, so tattooing is for girls. A girl without tattoo marks is not accepted by her mother-in-law. Though how she can prevent a daughter-in-law from entering her house even if she has no tattoo marks is difficult to imagine, as the Santhals have such a variety of marriages that if two people decide to get married there can be no stopping them!

No Indian tribe enjoys such a variety of marriages. There is a runaway marriage in which a couple go to the jungle, garland each other, and return to the village as husband and wife. This marriage is called *Baha Dor Bapla*. They have a love marriage called *Raja Raji* where a couple apply *sindoor* in the house of the headman, all other formalities being dispensed with. There is a marriage by capture called *Itut*, in which a man bent on marrying a young girl, puts *sindoor* on her forehead before a crowd and physically carries her off. This is an accepted form of marriage, but if the girl refuses to live with him there is a divorce.

Nevertheless, the most respected form of marriage for the Santhals is the one that is arranged by the parents of the boy. This marriage is called *Raibar Bapla* but even this is marked by a variety of exotic

customs. One such custom is when the bridegroom's party approaches the bride's house, they are not allowed to enter it till they have answered some riddles. One of their favourite riddles is, "There are sixty buffaloes and fifteen posts. Can you tie them in odd numbers? The answer to the riddle is to shout "*be jor*" which means you can tie them by force! Several such amusing riddles are asked before the party is allowed to enter the house.

The marriage ceremony is equally exotic. The bride enters the marriage *pandal* sitting on a basket held high up by the groom's elder brother. The bridegroom is carried to the place on the shoulder of his brother-in-law. The couple stand with the groom facing the east and the bride facing the west, and throw rice and sprinkle water over each other. After the groom applies *sindoor* on the bride's forehead, the couple must eat together from one *thali*. Later, the bride offers rice-beer to the groom's party, who in return present her with gifts.

The Santhals have beautiful dances. "*Lagren*" is their most popular dance, and although it can be performed any time, moonlit nights are preferred. It is a courtship dance and as the dancers move in circles they sing love songs.

They have a "*Don*" dance which is performed on joyous occasions such as a marriage. "*Jatur*" is the dance of the harvest festival. They even have a wild hunter's dance which is performed by men before going on a hunt. It involves leaping in the air and enacting hunting scenes.

The Santhals have a variety of musical instruments which provide the accompaniment to their dances. They have a variety of drums but the most commonly used are the *tumdak* and *tamak*. The *tumdak*



A young Santhal with his catch.

is made of burnt clay. The narrow end is covered by goats' skin and the wide end by bullock hide. The *tamak* is a kettle drum made of iron in the shape of a bowl and covered with bullock hide.

Their flute is with six holes, with a brass figure of Krishna carved on one end and at the other end a brass dove. They also have a *buan*, which they play during the Dussehra festival, and which consists of

the arc of a bow and a large hollow gourd, attached to add extra resonance.

The Santhals celebrate festivals throughout the year. They have a festival before sowing rice, for the sprouting rice, for harvesting rice and so it goes on. But their favourite festivals are the flower festival called *Bani Parab* and the winter harvest festival called *Sohrae*.

The flower festival is held in spring when the trees are covered with blossoms. Each village holds it on a different day so that the other villages can join as well. They collect at their sacred grove where they worship their oldest and tallest tree. A villager will shoot an arrow at the budding *sal* flowers. This is a sign for the villagers to start gathering flowers. They gather flowers for three days when they are laid before the priest. On the third day the priest returns to the village with the *sal* flowers. The priest stops at each house where the village maidens wash his feet and honour him, and, in turn, he offers them *sal* flowers.

The *Sohrae* is a very exciting festival, as full of action as a Hollywood western. An egg is hidden under a pile of rice. Cowherds drive their cows across the enclosure and if they manage to break the egg it is considered a sign of good luck. Finding the egg takes place amongst loud shouts and singing.

In the evening the village maidens deck themselves with flowers and carrying clay lamps they visit all the cowsheds. Young men playing pipes and drums go round as well to wake up all the cattle. The maidens then lead the way to the *akharas* where the dancing begins in earnest. The dance goes on right through the night. On the next day the cattle are blessed. The cows and buffaloes are lavishly decorated and

fed on delicacies. The priest blesses the cattle as young men keep dancing round them. The following day is the ceremonial hunt. With excitement ringing the air they leave in the hope that they will return with a tasty dish.

Anthropologists say that Santhals are one of the most ancient peoples of India. However, their sense of history is shallow, for among them the remembered history of five to six generations tends to get merged in mythology.

Efforts are now being made to educate the Santhals, but this task has to be done carefully, so that they do not lose their special character. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once said, "Our work does not stop with schools, dispensaries and hospitals. Of course we need these, but to stop there is rather a dead way looking at things. The

need today is to understand these people, make them understand us, and create a bond of affection and understanding."

One of the major problems in educating children is the sharp contrast between the home and school environment. Much of what is taught, such as health and hygiene, simply cannot be practised by tribal children because of their poverty. Also, they do not attend school regularly because they may be required for work at home or they may have to attend some religious function.

Despite the problems, Santhals are being taught useful skills such as wood carving and carpentry. It is hoped that with these skills they can join the mainstream of modern life and yet not leave their jungle home.

The Todas

The tribal population in South India is rather thin. However, though there is no single tribal pocket comparable to Bastar in MP or Chottanagpur in Bihar, yet South India has a number of tribes who can be described as among the most primitive in the world. One such tribe is the Todas, who have attracted the attention of anthropologists the world over, and were being studied even at the turn of the century.

The Todas are a proud, aristocratic and picturesque people. The Toda men with their flowing hair and beards—shaving is taboo—bear no resemblance to any other Indian tribe.

The Todas have been a puzzle to many anthropologists. Some anthropologists say that their clear complexions and striking features bear resemblance to the Assyrians who chose to settle down in the Nilgiri mountains many centuries ago. Names of gods and goddesses included in Toda prayers are found to be similar to Sumerian deities.

But whatever explanations anthropologists may give about their origins, the Todas believe that God created the first Toda woman from out of the first Toda man, who emerged out of the earth holding the tail of a buffalo, and when they die, they go to Amnor, a land situated where the sun sets and where their beloved buffaloes join them to provide them milk.

The Todas are devoted to their buffaloes, so much so that they refuse to breed any other animals. Each household, on an average, possesses eight to twelve buffaloes. These are a fine variety of the common water buffalo. The cows are given individual names and the family history of each female buffalo is remembered carefully.

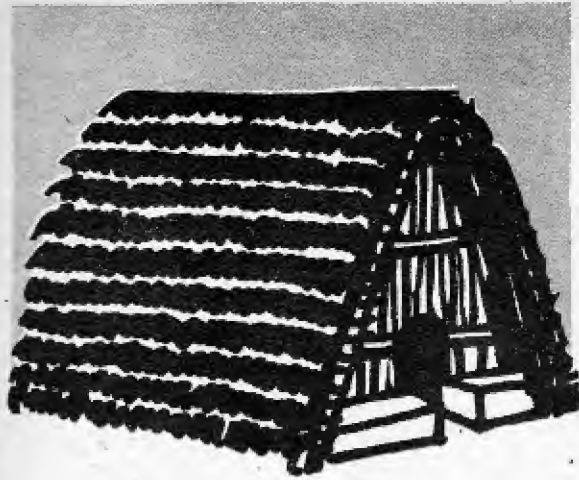
The Todas do not breed bulls. They simply give them away to their neighbours, the Kotas. They do not sell bulls out of religious sentiment.

The Todas distinguish two classes of buffaloes—sacred and ordinary. The ordinary buffaloes can be tended by the boys and ordinary men of the village and their milk is churned in the dwelling house. But the sacred buffaloes are looked after by special dairymen and the milk is churned in sacred dairies along with definite rituals.

Unlike other tribals the Todas have devised no weapons for hunting, not even a common trap. They are vegetarians and their staple diet consists of milk, butter and ghee. Many years back they would



The hair done in ringlets is a favourite style with Toda women.



Typical Toda hut with low entrance.

cook even their rice in milk but now they buy wheat, *dal* and other cereals from the market. They like to drink tea and coffee and most men and women enjoy liquor. Surprisingly, they do not ferment liquor as is done by most other tribals. Both men and women use tobacco in the form of snuff.

Although vegetarians, the Todas eat meat on ceremonial occasions, which occur three to four times a year. The meat eating ceremony consists of the killing and eating of a male calf, since the flesh of a female buffalo is taboo because it gives milk. The ceremony is performed very secretly in the middle of the forest.

But for people who are so tall, they have some of the tiniest huts to live in. The thatched huts have entrances so small that the Todas crawl into them. The roof and the side walls form one continuous curve made of split bamboo, rattan and thatch. Inside, at the centre is a hole in the floor used for pounding grain, and there is a fireplace at the back of the house. The women make mud platforms which are used for keeping household utensils and as sleeping places. In the front portion of the hut men carry out dairy operations. Except

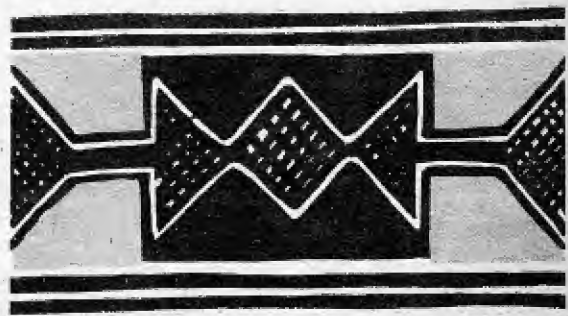
for the small entrance the huts are usually devoid of ventilation. Probably they built no windows or ventilators and kept their entrances small to protect themselves from attacks of wild animals and hostile tribes, as Todas have no defensive weapons.

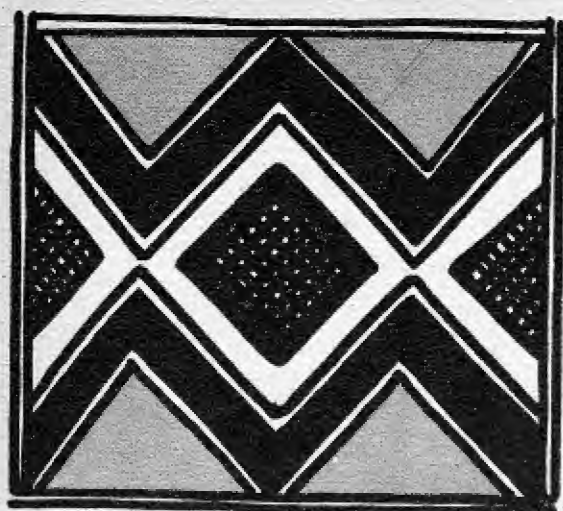
A few of these huts with their buffalo-pen and a dairy constitute a Toda village or *mund*. The dairy is similar in structure to the residential huts. These dairies are divided into two partitions—in the outer portion there is a fireplace and two beds where the dairyman lives and receives his friends, and in the inner portion he carries out dairy operations. The buffalo pens are circular areas with a fencing of stone blocks providing a single entrance for the buffaloes.

If anyone were to visit the Todas they would feel they have returned to an ancient world of pastoral nomads. The men and women wear a long loose mantle of coarse cotton, which covers their bodies from neck to feet, and can be said to resemble the roman toga. The mantle has red, blue or black stripes and is often embroidered as well. Shirts and blouses are gaining popularity but these are not allowed to be worn during ceremonies.

The Toda women love arranging their glossy black hair in long ringlets which hang on both sides of their head. The men

One of many geometric patterns used by the Todas.





A motif often found on the borders of shawls.

wear their hair in a thick mop while the children have their hair cut in a peculiar fashion. While the sides and top of the head are shaved, hair is allowed to grow in front and at the back of the head.

Toda women are tattooed on the chin, forearms, and above the breasts. The usual pattern consists of dotted lines and circles. Adult men reveal scars on their left shoulders, which they deliberately impose on themselves because they feel it will cure them of fatigue which comes from milking.

Marriage is an important social event. The boy's guardians make the proposal to the girl's parents. The boy's guardians have to pay a bride price which is paid in cattle. The bride's father, in return, gives a similar gift with these words, "We are all relations. I don't crave your property since you have proved your sincerity. I will give you buffaloes in return."

The girl's father indicates his consent by lightly touching the boy's forehead with the front of his foot. The girl has an important say in Toda marriages. To give her a chance to get acquainted with the boy, the girl and boy come together in a twenty-four hour trial marriage with a separate

house given to them. If the girl does not like the man she can refuse to marry him. But for this she will have to pay a penalty. If she agrees, the man gives her a necklace and a new mantle. They are then regarded as husband and wife. If the man has a brother or several brothers, the girl can accept them as husbands, and they will then share the bride price.

But despite a woman having an important say in choosing her husband, the position of women in the tribe is very low. They are not allowed to do any important work nor are they allowed to participate in ceremonies. The Toda men, in addition to the religious and ceremonial activities, do the milking, herding, churning, fuel gathering, building, trading and even the cooking. The women do such minor chores as cleaning the house, utensils, embroidering clothes, fetching water and pounding grain, but nowadays Toda women are allowed to do the cooking for their families.

The religion of the Todas is centred around their beloved buffaloes. From their sacred buffaloes, a few buffaloes called the *tirier* herd are selected. Adorned with bells, these are regarded as more sacred for they are said to be the direct descendants of the original sacred herd which Konka Der, the bell god, sent to the earth.

These buffaloes are looked after by a priest, a milk man and a guard. People holding these offices are selected from a special tribe called "the sons of god". While holding these offices, these three men must live away from their families and even give up their personal names. The priest commands respect from everyone, and even his father must bow before him.

Before becoming a priest, a man spends eight days in a forest, stripped of all his clothing, with just firewood for warmth.

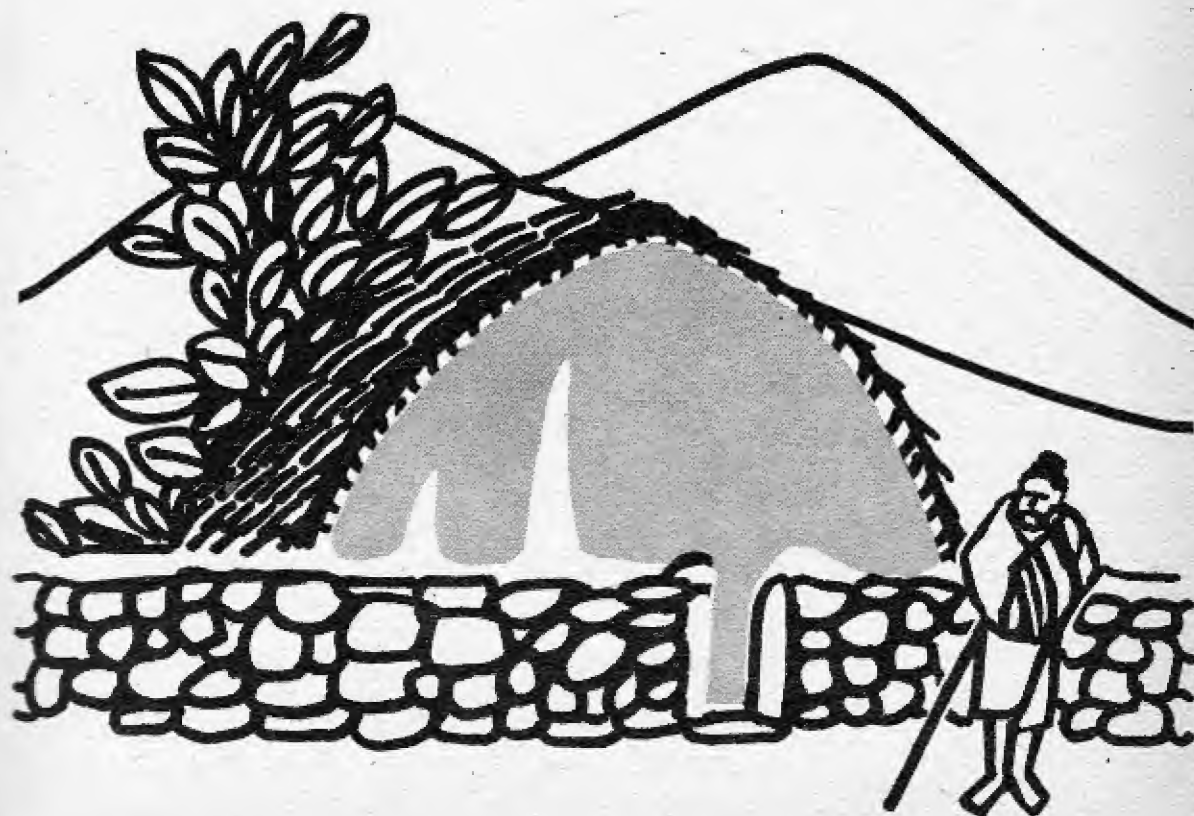
His food for these eight days consists of the bark of the *tude* tree. But the priest is free to give up his office any time he chooses, in which case a new priest is appointed. The priest is called a *palal* which literally means milkman, and shows how much importance the tribe gives to their buffaloes.

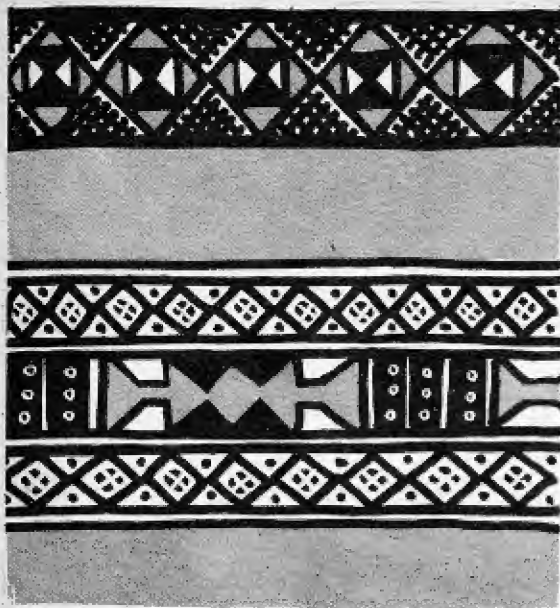
The priest must observe his duties meticulously. Every morning when he enters the dairy, he must light a ghee lamp which has five wicks. Then he must bless the buffaloes with his wand which he carries in his right hand. He then milks all the animals. The milk of the sacred herd is considered holy, and the milk vessels cannot be touched by anyone else. This milk cannot be sold. Only the ghee extracted from the milk can be exchanged for do-

mestic provisions. They believe in ghosts and spirits, but no elaborate supernatural pantheon, so the ceremonies are rather simple. They have two or three regular teinples for the whole tribe. These are simple thatched roof structures. Their only known place of pilgrimage is Mukurti, one of the high peaks in the Nilgiris, where they assemble on a holy day to celebrate.

The Toda ceremonies are accompanied by songs and dances. Their songs are very strange because they take apparently different objects and pair them together. For example, "thorn bushes and fallen stones" to mark the disrepair of a neglected dairy, "children and calves" and "dairy bells and an axe".

In the seclusion of the Nilgiri mountains





Motifs such as this are widely used by the Todas.

the Toda women have evolved a rich style of embroidery which they call *pugur*, meaning flower. The women first weave shawls called *poothkuli*. These shawls are then embroidered. The designs are symbolic. Their favourite design is the buffalo horn. The names of these shawls seem to have stepped out from the enchanted country of the Wizard of Oz. A shawl named after a priest has been called Izhadvinpugutu. Another shawl has been named after a girl called Resdazhpugar.

While the Todas are the most important of the Nilgiri tribals, there are other tribal groups which are nearly as ancient.

such as the Badagas who are agriculturists, the Kota who are artisans, and the Kurumba who are food gatherers and sorcerers. These tribal groups have remained isolated not only from the local Hindu population, but even from each other. While the villages of the four groups are close to one another, each group stands aloof. For example, while the Kota musicians are present at all major Toda ceremonies, if the band goes too close to a Toda dairy, the place is considered polluted and would have to be purified with elaborate rituals. However, while each group goes its separate way, the Todas are admired and respected by all.

The Todas have not been able to adapt themselves to the present times. Their population has been declining steadily and in 1961 their population numbered only 714. Sterility, female infanticide and inadequate medical treatment are some of the reasons for this decline. Economically the Todas are badly off. Their land has been steadily encroached upon by newcomers to the Nilgiris, and they are in no position to protect themselves from the greed and cleverness of unscrupulous businessmen. The Servants of India Society and the Government of Tamil Nadu are making some attempts to help the Todas by educating their children and by giving them medical and financial assistance.

The Gaddis

The Gaddis are a tribe of sheperds who live in the Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh and in some districts of the Punjab and Kashmir. Pasturing has been their traditional occupation and they still measure wealth by the number of sheep they possess. They use the word *dhan* for wealth and also for sheep.

They are a handsome tribe. The women are fair, with rosy cheeks and striking features. They wear a long woollen dress called a *choga*, which reaches down to their ankle. Under the *choga* they wear a cotton shirt and they tie a *dupatta* over their head. The *choga* is tightened at the waist by a woollen cord. In winter, because of the acute cold, the women wear pyjamas under their dress. Their shoes are known as *muchris* and are distinguished from the men's shoes, known as *nagras*, by different decorations and designs.

The Gaddi women love ornaments and have a fascinating variety of them. They wear a *chaunk* in the head, a *baloo* or nose-ring around the nose, *toka* and *kangnoo* or waist belts around their waist, and also bracelets, bangles, necklaces, rings and toe-rings. Their jewellery is made from gold and silver. Women also carry a leather money bag called *khisru*.

Gaddi men are not to be outdone by the women. They also love to wear ornaments and have a wide variety of them. Men wear ear-rings made of gold that are known as *nanti* and weigh two tolas per pair. They wear silver bands round their waist, finger rings and necklaces. They also keep a flint box and a leather bag for cash. Their money bag and tobacco pouch are unique creations. They are often made in the shape of a mango or fish and are ornamented in

a variety of geometric patterns.

Men wear a woollen cap or *topi*, a *choga*, and cotton shirts under the *chogas*. They also tie their *chogas* at the waist by a cord which they refer to as *shiva-re-seli* or symbol of Lord Shiva, and is supposed to represent the cobra coiled around Shiva's neck. They are used for carrying loads on their back. At night they tether their sheep with the cord. They also use it as a pillow when they go on their long journeys. From their *shiva-re-seli* hangs a knife which they carry for self-protection.

The Gaddis manufacture their own clothes. Yarn is spun from wool by means of the spinning wheel or the whorl, the finer clothing being made on the spinning whorl. It is woven on handlooms which are found in every village. Only their cotton



shirts are imported from the plains.

Gaddi villages are usually situated between 4,000 and 9,000 feet on the hill-sides, though some of their settlements are at heights of 10,500 feet.

The houses are two or three stories high, and the materials used are wooden planks, stones, earth and cowdung. The roof is made from tiles of slate, though higher up in the mountains where slate is not available, the thatch is formed of cut planks of wood laid in double layers, to prevent seepage of water or snow. There is a verandah on each floor and on the ground there is a flat courtyard. Cooking is done in ovens in the bedroom, though care is taken to see that the wooden floors are not damaged.

For generations pasturing has been the traditional occupation of the Gaddis. The number of animals each family possesses varies a great deal. Rich families possess seven to eight hundred sheep and goats, while poor families may possess none. The latter are hired by the rich to look after their flock. Usually, three or four families collect their animals and make up a number of 400. Two shepherds are then placed in charge of them.

Looking after such a large herd of animals is a very tiresome job. Sheep have a habit of straying off into difficult places and the sheperds are constantly on the move, climbing up and down the steep mountain paths. They must pay special attention to lambs or kids and pregnant animals. The shepherds have trained sheep dogs to assist them in their work. The dogs are trained to guide the sheep in a particular direction according to whistles given by the shepherds. Division of animals are also maintained by the sheep dogs. These dogs are very brave and will fearlessly defend the animals against attacks by bears

and panthers. There is a deep attachment between the shepherd and his dog and many tribal legends have been woven around these heroic creatures. Besides grazing, each animal has to be provided with two pounds of salt every year. This is necessary for their health.

If a shepherd has been hired for six months, his food has to be supplied to him by the owner of the herd. A shepherd's diet consists of *chapati* made of the flour of maize and a chutney made of *amlu* leaves which grow on the hillsides near the snow line. He is also allowed to drink milk from the sheep and goats. Meat is only eaten when an animal dies in an accident or is offered as sacrifice to some diety. In addition to money, a shepherd earns a pair of shoes, one blanket, one woollen dress and two sheep in one season.

The sheep graze along the mountain slopes during the summer months. In winter, when the slopes are covered with snow, they migrate to the plains of Punjab, where they remain for a couple of months. In the past, the farmers of Punjab used to invite the Gaddis to tether their animals in their fields, so that the droppings might serve as manure. But this practise is being stopped as the pressure on land is increasing considerably.

Many grown up animals are sold for meat in the Punjab. Raw wool is also sold there. Some of the wool is used for making carpets and blankets by the Gaddis, and these are then sold in the markets in the plains. Goats' hair is turned into rope, or even boots which reach up to the knees. Such shoes are in common use, and are useful in marches over snowy ground.

The shepherds, their wives, and children are used to this migratory life. When it is time to move, the man carries on his

back his clay *hukka* and his all-purpose bag called a *khalroo*, in which all his foodstuffs and other essentials are kept. The women and boys are also used to carrying heavy packs on their backs, and it is not unusual to see a woman with a baby and a *khalroo* tied to her back. They use no tents, just sleep out in the open. During the monsoon they take shelter under trees and even projecting rocks. Often if they are not able to find trees or rocks, they snuggle against their animals to keep warm.

The terraces are built by the farmer himself with pieces of rock which he gathers from waste land or hill-sides. During



heavy rain these terraces are broken down and the stones slide into lower fields. Nevertheless these stones still remain the property of the man who had collected them. It becomes the duty of the owner of the lower field to gather them in a heap, so that his neighbour higher up may retrieve them later on.

Ploughing is done with the help of cattle, but higher up the *chungroo*—a cross between a yak and a plains cattle—is harnessed for the purpose.

The summer crop is sown in late May and harvested in September, after which winter crops are cultivated in the same field, and these are harvested in June. Maize is the most important summer crop while barley and buck-wheat are grown in winter. Beans, potatoes and cabbages are grown during the summer months.

The Gaddis like to help each other in every activity. If one person has to build a house, the entire village will help him build it. They are a very friendly people and they take their friendship very seriously. An unusual tradition that they follow is that good friends make a pilgrimage to the Manimahesh Lake where they enter the water together, exchange sweets, put *tilak* on each other's forehead and pledge their loyalty to each other.

The Gaddis worship the god Shiva and they call their land Shiva *bhumi* or land of Shiva. They believe that Shiva possessed two capitals, one on the Kailash peak, which was visible to the people of the surrounding peaks, the other in the lower region of Patalpur. This is probably a subconscious reflection of their own life which is divided between two regions.

They offer sacrifices on all kinds of occasions, be it a birth, marriage, death, laying a foundation stone, undertaking a



A view of a Gaddi village.

journey, before sowing, harvesting and so on. They have a strict procedure which must be followed each time. The animal is washed, flowers and rice are showered on its head, then water and grass are offered to it. The devotees must stand with copper coins in their hands at the time it is killed. If the animal shudders after being killed, it means god has accepted the sacrifice. The priest keeps chanting prayers during the sacrifice and is entitled to the skin, head and a leg.

The Gaddis believe in magic. They believe the magical force to be so powerful that it can turn a person into a mere shadow. What is even more interesting is their belief in witchcraft. Their witches, like the witches of fairy tales, actually ride on broomsticks and are called *dayans*. Their *dayans* sleep through the day but at night they go into forests where they spend their time dancing and casting evil spells.

To counter this menace they have witch doctors who are called *gardi chelas*. The witch doctors enjoy great importance since

they know how to remove these spells. The witch doctor casts a counter-spell on the patient. This spell makes the patient dance, and while he is dancing the witch doctor provides the musical accompaniment by playing an instrument called the *dupatra*. At the end of the dance the patient will be able to disclose the name of the *dayan*. Once the name of the *dayan* is known, a little extra treatment is given to the patient and he is able to recover.

The Gaddis are a simple and happy people. They are fond of singing and dancing. Gaddi men look very striking as they leap and dance and brandish their staves. Their songs are mostly romantic and sentimental, woven around famous lovers like Chancola and Kunpoo, and Phulaman and Ranjhum. These themes are often embroidered in the famous *rumals* of the Chamba, which are an intimate part of the life of the common people. These square *rumals* are embroidered in double satin stitch, generally by the women in the family. They form an important part in the girl's trousseau.

The Gaddis lead a hard life. Before winter starts they migrate from high altitude mountains to low altitude plains to provide grazing grounds for their sheep. But even these villages become snow-bound and if there is a long spell of bad weather they are not able to leave their homes for weeks on end. Also, despite being hard working their land is difficult to cultivate and an average family manages to make ends meet with difficulty. The Gaddi farmers' suffer an agricultural loss of 25 per cent each year because of damages to crops by wild animals, especially bears. To escape from this harsh life many join the Indian army.

The Onge of the Little Andaman

There is a Hindu legend that when Lord Rama wanted to bridge the sea to recover Sita, his consort, who had been abducted by king Ravana of Lanka, he first thought of using the Andaman and Nicobar islands for the purpose. Later he changed his mind and used Adam's Bridge, a string of islands near Sri Lanka. This is perhaps the earliest reference to the Andamans and Nicobars.

Ptolemy, the great geographer of the Roman Empire, located the islands in his maps in the second century A.D. However, it was not till the East India Company started taking an interest in these islands that the world began to learn with some accuracy about the Andaman islands. But it was only in 1788 that these islands were surveyed and carefully mapped.

Onge (*on-gay*) live in the southernmost of the 204 islands comprising the Andamans. This beautiful island is called the Little Andaman and it is 26 miles long and 16 miles broad. It is covered with dense tropical forests, and extensive coral reefs fringe the shores.

According to the 1971 census, the Onge number 112—a small number indeed. Even as late as the mid-sixties they roamed the entire island, but by the mid-seventies, as the island got more heavily populated with settlers, government offices etc. Onge clustered around one small creek.

The Onge resemble the pygmies of Africa. They are extremely short. Their skin is dark but with a bluish tinge, and their hair is done in tight, short curls. The Onges' bodies are perfectly adapted to the tropical sun and the dense forests. Their

short size enables them to slip through the dense forests very easily, and their short hair is also a great help for it does not get entangled with twigs and thorns. Like the African pygmies they have flat, broad noses and thick lips.

The Onge men wear nothing but a plain rope belt made from bark fibre. The belt is used to carry their knife. It has now become the custom to wear a strip of cloth, two to three inches wide, between the legs. The women wear a belt of Pandanus leaf which is one or two inches broad. Suspended from the front of the belt is a tassel of fibre from young unopened palm leaf. Both men and women wear bracelets made of shells.

One of the favourite pastimes of the Onge women is to decorate their bodies, and those of their family members, with red and white clay. The clay is prepared by mixing red ochre, water, saliva and turtle fat. The clay paste is carefully applied with the fingers so as to create a system of lines from which the black skin shows through. Patterns vary according



to the artistic skill of the painter. Besides improving their looks, the painting has its medical uses. In cases of illness, the aching parts of the body are painted in order to cure the patient. The Onges have no concept of hygiene as we know it. They seldom wash, but are often drenched by the water dripping from every leaf when they are out in the jungle.

The Onge live entirely on the natural products offered by the sea and the forest. From the sea they get turtles, fish, crustaceans and molluscs; in the forest they hunt wild pigs, collect honey and some roots.

The hunters are armed with bow and arrow. The bow is made from a straight piece of wood, while the bow string is made from bark strips which are twisted together to provide the suitable length. Two kinds of arrows are used. For shooting fish the arrow consists of sharpened iron wire, whereas pigs are killed with arrows which have a lancet shaped iron-head. The Onge have collected this metal from ships that have been wrecked along their shore in the last two or three centuries.

It is from bamboo that they make their fishing arrow. It is cleverly made, the object being not only to shoot the animal with it, but to ensure that it does not escape into the thick jungle, and that it indicates its position by crying through the sheer agony caused by the piercing arrow. They are also adept at canoe-making, which becomes an important event in their lives.

Honey is collected in buckets made from a log of soft wood, hollowed out with a chisel, or from a single joint of bamboo, as pieces drift away from Burma to the shores of the Little Andaman.

They live in groups of ten families headed by a chief. Each group lives in a communal hut, circular in form, and that-

ched with mats of palm leaf. In the centre of the hut is an open space for communal cooking and dancing. The hut is divided into ten sections and each family lives in one section. Each group has its own clearly defined hunting grounds. The Onge have no clear concept of religion. However, they do have a belief in the survival of the spirit after death.

The Onge have a most interesting way of greeting each other. They sit on each others' laps and embrace fervently without, however, speaking to each other. The longer the separation the longer the time taken for embracing.

One of the chief delights of the Onge is to catch giant turtles. These are cut into pieces when still alive, and thrown into boiling water, or sometimes are even roasted alive. Crab and pork are also hot

Fishing with bow and arrow.



favourites.

But what they love most of all is honey. When an Onge finds a hive of bees, he puts a mark on the tree to establish his ownership. However, the actual gathering of honey is done by a group, which quickly climbs without any protection to their bodies. Here nature comes to their aid. They grow all over the island a bush called the *tonjoghe*. The leaves of this plant are chewed and the pulp is smeared all over the body, and even applied in the hair. This gives them total immunity from bees.

The daily life of the Onge is simple. Shortly after sunrise, the hunting parties, which sometimes include women, set out in search of prey. In the camp, mothers attend to their children, make baskets and fishing nets, and carefully keep the fires alive. The Onge cannot kindle a fire. Hence they have to keep fires burning in their camps all the time. They are experts at selecting wood which keeps smouldering all the time. When travelling or hunting, a piece of smouldering wood is carefully carried along.

In the afternoon the hunters return and the camp bustles with life. Preparations begin for the evening meal, the chief meal of the day. Women bring firewood and water. Various kinds of tins, thrown overboard by some passing ships and washed ashore, serve as cooking pots. Smaller tins as well as shells serve as plates. The Onge use elongated shells for drinkings cups.

They are terrified of being without fire, and that is why they keep one burning constantly. If by chance the fire goes out, they are very clever at re-kindling it. When lightning strikes one of the trees, they use the smouldering branches as a source of fire.

They associate darkness with evil and



A typical Andamanese hut.

they have an interesting myth about how darkness was created. In the beginning there was no darkness and life was very gay. But one of the ancestors, apparently in a fit of temper (owing to his lack of success in fishing), crushed a cicada, and the cry of the insect brought darkness upon the world.

The art of making pottery is not known to the Onge of today, but a large number of pottery pieces have been found on the island which indicate that their ancestors knew pottery. But it is not known how this art was lost to them.

After the evening meal, the Onge light several fires and begin their dancing and singing. Men and women stand in rows opposite to each other and do a series of repetitive steps which are simple but interesting to watch. As they dance they use no accompaniment, not even a sounding board.

The Onge and their neighbours the Jarawa who live in the North Sentinel

Island, are hostile to any outsiders that dare step onto their islands. They have been described as a "brutish and savage race" who were supposed to eat and kill all strangers who landed or were wrecked upon their shores. But this charge of cannibalism was never proved. One of the reasons for their hostility was because the Malayan slave-traders would try to capture them by raiding these islands from time to time.

In the past few years, it has become possible to establish contact with the Onge. A few years back, the Indian government sent the INS *Investigator* to the Little Andaman. The captain of the ship described in detail this first encounter. "Through the field glass I searched the shore. There was a group of Onge—a bunch of dark, nearly naked pygmies—running along the sandy beach, obviously agitated by the appearance of our boat. Small children and babies were among them—a good sign. If they were evilly disposed towards us, they would have removed the children and hidden themselves in order to ambush us. Moreover, nobody seemed to carry weapons. They obviously had decided to receive us in a friendly way.

"I arranged that the first landing boat should carry presents for them in order to convince them of our friendly inten-

tions. As they saw our rowing boat leave the frigate, they brought their outrigger canoes into the water and came to meet us through the heavy surf. Shouting and gesticulating and laughing, they turned their canoes and accompanied us to the shore.

"As soon as I jumped into the sand I was surrounded by a joyful crowd. Small strips of red cloth and tobacco leaves were accepted by them with enthusiasm and they could be easily persuaded, by means of signs, to help us to land our equipment."

The Onge is marvellously adjusted to his environment. But an increasing contact with civilization will bring about changes in their style of living. And this is what is worrying a great many anthropologists. Increasing contact will lead to the increase of luxuries and diseases which can have a harmful effect on them. In fact, it can lead to their virtual extinction. After all, this has been the fate of the natives who lived on the Great Andaman Island. After the establishment of the Port Blair settlement, the Great Andamanese tribals became virtually extinct. The Onge has survived only because he has remained aloof from civilization. And although contact cannot be completely avoided today, the government should try to do its best to prevent these remaining few tribes from dying out.

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